

# Five Years Of The Rhode Island Local Agriculture And Seafood Act Small Grant Program



## Impacts And Outcomes June 2018

PREPARED FOR  
The Rhode Island Food Policy Council

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## OVERVIEW

This evaluation of the first five years of the LASA grant program tells the story of a small fund that made small investments in small businesses and saw some outsized returns.

The program's impacts include increased production, new products developed, new production methods trialed, improved farm business viability, collaboration and enhanced networks developed, new jobs created, on-farm infrastructure contributing to food safety and quality, and more Rhode Island customers experiencing and nourished by locally produced foods. This report summarizes findings from a study of the program's impacts and outcomes, based on a survey of LASA grant recipients, interviews with select grantees, and a roundtable discussion with the LASA Advisory Committee, who described the program's impacts in their own words.

*“LASA has literally transformed my business, and I am forever grateful for that.”*

In addition to the key figures highlighted at right, the study also revealed some key findings from the recipients' experience:

- *Small investments can have big returns.*
- *Grantees want to learn from each other.*
- *Cross-sector partnership has enhanced the program's success and impacts.*
- *LASA exists within a broader capital landscape that is fragmented and incomplete.*

These findings, and others described in the pages that follow, provide a snapshot of the impacts of Rhode Island's LASA program, and the ways its outcomes can be sustained into the future.

### KEY IMPACTS OF LASA

From a case study of 27 grantees from the 2014-2016 grant cycles

**\$2.5 MILLION** IN NEWLY SECURED FUNDING (OUTSIDE OF LASA), INCLUDING **\$1.265 MILLION** IN LOANS

**84** NEW JOBS CREATED

**\$5.05 MILLION** IN INCREASED SALES

**25** NEW PRODUCT INTRODUCTIONS

**23** NEW MARKET CHANNELS

**41** NEW PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS



## INTRODUCTION

Rhode Island's Local Agriculture and Seafood Act (LASA) Grants Program was established by the Local Agriculture and Seafood Act of 2012 to support and invest in the growth, development, and marketing of local food and to strengthen the state's food system. Grants have been awarded over the course of five years, since 2014. The grant program has been funded by a unique public private partnership, with annual contributions of \$100,000 in funding from the State of Rhode Island and an additional \$130,000 in matching funds from the Henry P. Kendall Foundation, the van Beuren Charitable Foundation (vBCF), and the Rhode Island Foundation.

The program's administration, like its funding, is a cross-sector endeavor, a partnership between the state Department of Environmental Management (DEM) and the nonprofit RI Food Policy Council. Similarly, members of the program's Advisory Committee (who select grantees from the applicant pool each year) are appointed by the Director of DEM from a broad range of different food system sectors and perspectives, including farmers, fishermen, food business owners, planners, and experts in economic development, marketing, policy and law, public health and food systems.

Food, agriculture, aquaculture and fisheries are growing industries that have an increasing presence in RI and a significant role in shaping the state's identity and quality of place. The LASA grant program was created to provide small grants (up to \$20,000 in funding for projects of up to two years) to food initiatives and enterprises that typically struggle to receive funding from other sources, either because they are too new, lack sufficient assets, have social enterprise objectives that require patient capital, or are programmatic and unlikely to show profit. The following are the program's five priorities (the last two were added in the 2018 grant cycle):

- Supporting the entry, growth and sustainability of small or beginning agriculture producers (including aquaculture producers<sup>1</sup>) and fishermen/women;
- Fostering new collaborations or sharing new information among Rhode Island producers and producer-supporting organizations;

<sup>1</sup> Pursuant to RI state and federal policy, aquaculture falls under the banner of agriculture, rather than commercial fisheries.



- Supporting new products or new sales channels with clearly defined markets, including institutional purchasing of local food;
- Enhancing access to and availability of agricultural land for producers, including farm transition planning and implementation;
- Addressing gap areas or implementation needs identified in Rhode Island's first comprehensive Food Strategy Relish Rhody (released in 2017)

Three questions guided this evaluation and frame this report: 1) How was LASA money distributed over the five years of the program? 2) What impact did the grant funds have on grantees and the food system as a whole? 3) What trends can be observed from year to year in the application and grantee pool itself about how the sector has changed?

## METHODOLOGY

In the spring of 2018, the RI Food Policy Council retained the food systems consultancy Karen Karp & Partners (KK&P) to evaluate the impact that LASA funding has had on the individual businesses and organizations funded as well as on the food system and food and agriculture industries as a whole. An Advisory Committee was assembled to provide guidance throughout the process and included representatives from DEM, the vBCF, Kendall Foundation, Food Policy Council, the governor's office, and Social Enterprise Greenhouse.

KK&P analyzed the applicant pool and the grantee pool for the program's five years to identify trends both in requests for funding and in how the funding was directed. A typology was developed to identify applicants and grantees by their location (RI's 39 municipalities); structure (business, nonprofit, or cooperative); sector (agriculture, aquaculture, commercial fishing/seafood, value added production, programming/non-production); whether they applied as a single entity (one business) or as a collaborative group; whether they were entities that were, according to grant program guidelines, "small" or "beginning"; and primary and secondary project focus (infrastructure, supply chain development, marketing and education for industry, marketing and education for consumers, workforce/training, food access, network development/information sharing, new product, new market channel, increased production, new production method, agritourism). Because many projects have expansive objectives, project budgets—how the grant money was spent—were used to define the primary and secondary project focus.

A survey was developed to measure grantee project impact and to explore grantees' experience of the program. Grantees who received awards in 2014, 2015 and 2016 (early enough to have completed grant projects at the time this evaluation was conducted) were invited to participate. The survey was completed independently online by many grantees and was administered by phone to others. While the LASA grant program does have a grantee reporting system, the survey enabled the evaluation team to include questions about technical assistance and access to capital, and to explore how project success, challenges, and impacts were felt during and since the grant period.

Interviews were conducted with three grantees (representing the range of types of



organizations and projects funded) in order to understand in more qualitative detail how the LASA grant impacted their businesses or programming in the immediate grant period and in the longer term.

KK&P also facilitated a roundtable discussion with select members of the LASA Advisory Committee—both current members and those who served in the program's early years—to gather more anecdotal information about trends observed from year to year, to gain insight into how priorities and discussions evolved over the course of the program, and to explore what the evolution of those discussions shows (qualitatively) about how LASA may have impacted the food system.

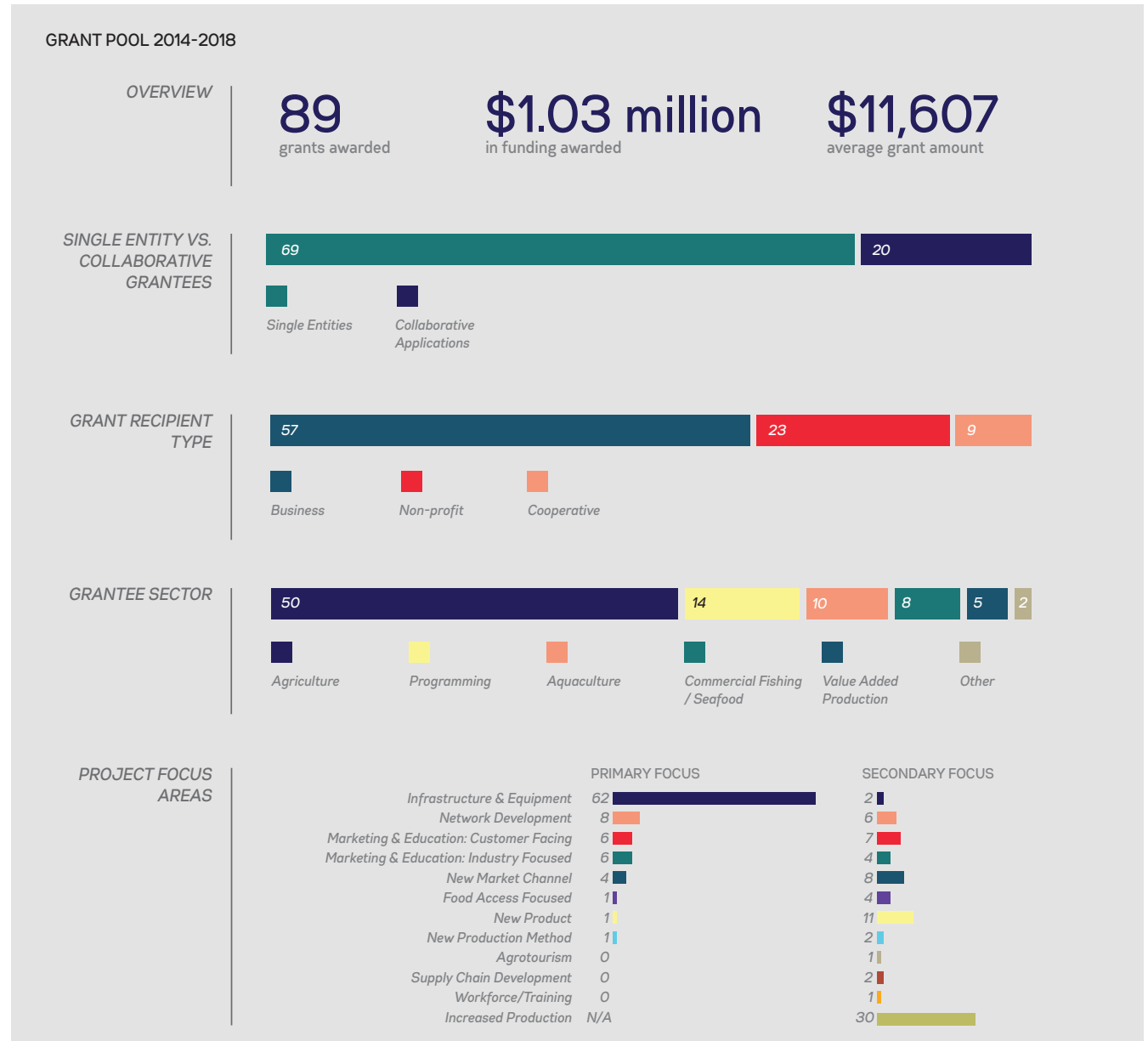
Each year, the DEM has allotted a small portion of the total LASA funds to the RI Seafood Marketing Collaborative. Because that funding was not a part of the LASA competitive grants program, that initiative was not included in this evaluation.

# HOW WAS LASA MONEY DISTRIBUTED OVER THE FIVE YEARS OF THE PROGRAM?

Between 2014 and 2018, 89 LASA grants totaling \$1,033,115 were awarded. Between 15 and 21 grants were awarded each year. Those 89 awards were selected from a pool of 359 applications to the LASA program, with total funds requested coming in at \$5,417,445, more than five times the total amount awarded. Sixteen grantees received more than one LASA grant. The graphic at right details an aggregate portrait of how the funds were allocated, and the pages that follow include a graphic analysis of the aggregate applicant pool.

It is important to note that in every year of the program, the Advisory Committee struggled with final award decisions, as many worthy and ambitious businesses and organizations applied. Further, LASA grantees did not always receive the full amount they requested—between 2014 and 2018, 29 grantees received less funding than they had requested (totaling almost \$200,000).

In the course of this evaluation, several stakeholders noted that the program’s impacts flow downhill from the application solicitation, review, and selection process. Each year, program administrators promote the grant opportunity across geographies and sectors in the state’s diverse food system (urban and rural, land and sea, production and processing, marketing and education). Once applications are received, every member of the Advisory Committee reads, evaluates, and scores every grant application. The committee then convenes for approximately 10 hours of meetings each year, for discussion and to





## HOW WAS LASA MONEY DISTRIBUTED OVER THE FIVE YEARS OF THE PROGRAM? (CONTINUED)

craft funding recommendations. With DEM chairing the cross-sector Committee as a non-voting member, the Food Policy Council participating in a facilitative role, and Committee meetings open to the public, the LASA program's selection process is significantly community driven.

The majority of LASA grants were given to applications submitted by individual entities (69), and 20 grants were awarded to group or collaborative applications. Seventy-nine of the 89 grants were awarded to businesses that could be classified as either being or directly serving small (annual revenue less than \$350,000) and beginning (less than 10 years of production), based on LASA grant guidelines.

Fifty-six percent of total grant funds were provided to businesses, 31% was awarded to nonprofits, and the remaining \$129,000 was awarded to cooperatives. \$543,737 was awarded to agriculture sector projects, \$104,936 to the aquaculture sector, \$86,039 to commercial fisheries focused projects, \$196,613 to marketing or educational programming, and \$77,866 to value added production (non-farmers who process locally grown farm product). As expected because of the sector's size and the LASA program priorities, agriculture sector grants were dominant in every year on the grant program, ranging from a low of \$84,444 in 2017 to a high of \$149,457 in 2018. Aquaculture sector grants ranged significantly from year to year, with approximately \$5,000 awarded in 2014 and again in 2018, but with over \$42,000 awarded to aquaculture producers in 2017.

*The majority of grants awarded by the LASA program were to projects with a primary project focus on infrastructure and equipment - 62 grants valued at \$657,128.*

The majority of grants awarded by the LASA program were to projects with a primary project focus on infrastructure and equipment (62 grants valued at \$657,128), with grantees using funds for investments including high tunnels to extend the growing season, tractors, wash and pack lines, cold storage units, innovative equipment scaled to small farms, a tea bagging machine, an herb drying room, beehives, and

"caterpillar" tunnels (low tunnels used primarily for pest and disease management). Significant funds were also awarded to projects focused on network development and information sharing (8 grants, \$132,259), including conducting research on sugar kelp and sharing findings, and starting a shared equipment library for South County farmers; customer-facing marketing and education (6 grants, \$147,941), including growing a RI-based seed company, and promoting lesser known seafood species; and industry-facing marketing and education (6 grants, \$84,568), including wintertime "short courses" for young farmers (focused on welding, tractor mechanics, e.g.), development of a guide for farmers to navigate regulations and permits related to on-farm sales, and seafood education for culinary professionals.

A secondary project focus was also attributed to each grantee. The largest share of projects focused secondarily on increased production (30 grants valued at \$282,811). The next largest focus areas were grantees seeking to develop new products (11 grants, \$109,108) and develop new market channels (8 grantees, with grants totaling \$110,756).

*A number of LASA grants have had reach and impact far beyond the location of the grantee.*

The LASA program's grantees are based in 26 of the state's 39 municipalities. In cases where the grantee, for example, lives in one town but farms in another, the location of the farm was chosen as the project/grant location. Yet a number of grants awarded over the program's first five years have reach and impact far beyond one location. In addition to those described above, such as the equipment library or statewide marketing and education efforts, LASA grantees used funds to increase the number of farmers' markets across the state that are equipped to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program dollars (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), develop supply chains to bring undervalued seafood species to the RI Community Food Bank, provide business/farmland succession planning services to farmers, and grow a program to harvest crops that would otherwise be left in farm fields and distribute them to emergency food providers.

# HOW WAS LASA MONEY DISTRIBUTED OVER THE FIVE YEARS OF THE PROGRAM? (CONTINUED)

## FIVE YEARS OF LASA AT A GLANCE

### AWARDS 2014-2018

TOTAL AWARDS **89**

FUNDS AWARDED **\$1.03 M**

RI MUNICIPALITIES REPRESENTED **26 (67%)**

REPEAT GRANTEES **16**

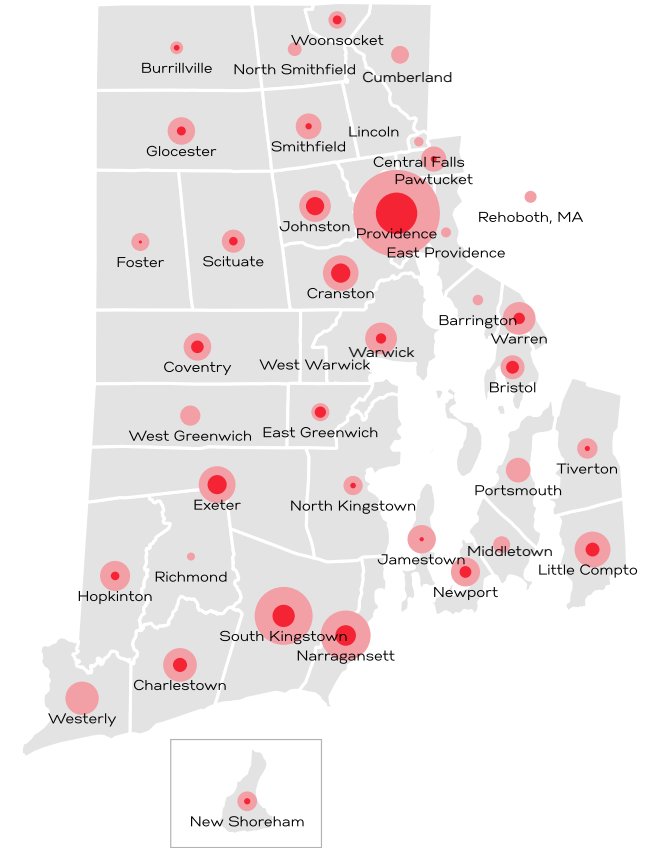
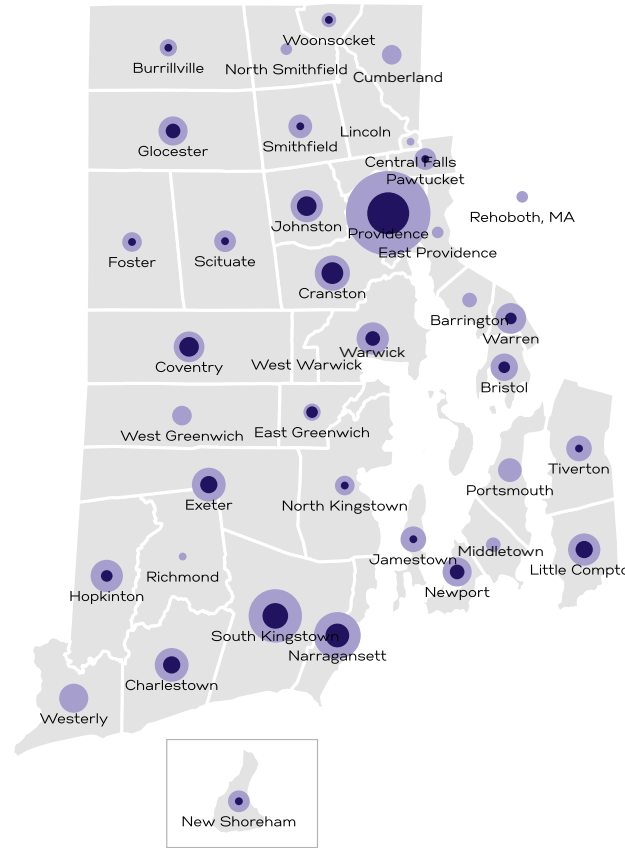
### APPLICATIONS 2014-2018

TOTAL APPLICATIONS RECEIVED **359**

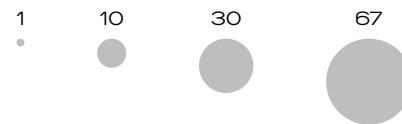
FUNDS REQUESTED **\$5.42 M**

RI MUNICIPALITIES REPRESENTED **36 (92%)**

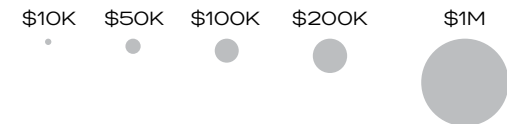
REPEAT APPLICANTS **70**



● # applications received 2014-2018  
 ● # awards granted 2014-2018



● Total funds requested 2014-2018  
 ● Total funds granted 2014-2018



# WHAT IMPACT DID THE GRANT FUNDS HAVE ON GRANTEES AND THE FOOD SYSTEM AS A WHOLE?

Though the LASA program has provided five years of grants, at the time of this evaluation, just three grant years of funded projects had been completed. The 44 unique grantees from 2014 through 2016 were invited to complete a survey, and 27 (61%) did so. The section that follows provides a case study of the LASA grant program's impact on those 27 businesses and the impact that they, in turn, have had on the state's food system. The 27 grantees together received \$373,659 in LASA grants, which represents 61% of the grant funds expended between 2014 and 2016. Impacts described in this section are measured not just for the 2 years of the grant period, but in aggregate since grants were received.

As highlighted in the lead section of this report, the 27 case study grantees were asked what the LASA grant enabled them to do and what impact it enabled them to have. The following aggregated results emerged:

- **\$5.05 million in increased sales.**
- **25 new product introductions**, with a broad range of new products entering the marketing including fishcakes, herbal teas, duck, oyster seed, family sized portions of sea robin tails.
- **84 new jobs**, including 21 full time and 63 part time jobs.
- **23 new market channels entered**, including restaurants, institutions, emergency food agencies, farmers markets, and retail.
- **41 new partnerships and collaborations** generated, both among food system businesses and organizations and with local and regional entities outside the food system.

LASA grantees range from ambitious fast growing businesses to farms and social impact businesses that are growing incrementally to program and service providers whose impacts are not in sales, and the 27 grantees surveyed reflect this range. This makes return on investment tricky to reliably estimate. However, if the trend in increased sales held true across the entire 2014-2018 grant pool, LASA will have catalyzed an additional \$14 million in agriculture and seafood gross sales.

**Additionally, surveyed grantees secured approximately \$2.5 million in additional funding after receiving their LASA grants**, and 78% of responding grantees indicated that having received a LASA grant was at least somewhat helpful in securing that additional funding. Of those receiving additional funding, 80% were structured as businesses (as opposed to nonprofits or cooperatives),

*The LASA grantee survey received 27 responses, representing 61% of the 2014-2016 grantee pool and 61% of 2014-2016 grant funding by dollar amount.*

*For those 27 grantees, the LASA grants had the following impacts:*



**25 NEW PRODUCT INTRODUCTIONS**  
including fishcakes, sea robin tails, winter squash, duck, pet food, and herbal tea



**23 NEW MARKET CHANNELS**  
including restaurants, retail stores, food pantries, farm stands, and shellfish dealers



**41 NEW PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS**  
strengthening relationships and market connections within and across seafood, agriculture, and food system sectors



**84 NEW JOBS**  
21 full-time and 63 part-time



**\$5.05 million IN INCREASED SALES**



If that trend held true for the entire 2014-2018 grantee pool, LASA will have enabled a gross sales increase of nearly **\$14 million** for the state's seafood and agriculture sectors.



## WHAT IMPACT DID THE GRANT FUNDS HAVE ON GRANTEES AND THE FOOD SYSTEM AS A WHOLE? (CONTINUED)

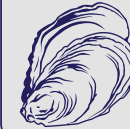
80% operate in the agriculture sector, 80% had LASA programs focused on investments in infrastructure and equipment (as a primary project focus) and on increased production (33%) or introducing new products (26%) as a secondary project focus.

Of that \$2.5 million, \$1,265 million worth of funding was received in loans by five grantees. The remaining funds came from the following sources: seven federal grants were received totaling \$153,000; five private foundation grants totaling \$147,130; \$630,000 came from private investors or crowdsourcing; \$195,000 from family and friends; almost \$104,000 in state grants; and approximately \$12,430 in miscellaneous other sources. Just two respondents indicated that they had received no additional funding of any kind since receiving the LASA grant.

Survey respondents were asked whether their LASA-funded project was completed successfully. Seventy-eight percent said yes (n=21), 19% (n=5) said somewhat, and just one reported that the project was not completed successfully. Of the grantees that indicated that their project was at least somewhat successful, 90% were categorized as both "small" and "beginning" farmers or businesses; 62% came from the agriculture sector; 14% from the aquaculture sector; 14% from programming (e.g. marketing and education, rather than production); and one (5%) was a non-producer value added processor. Of those who considered their projects successful, the dominant primary project focus was on infrastructure and equipment (76%) (as it was for the grantee pool as a whole), while the dominant secondary project foci were increased production (24%), new product development/introduction (19%), and network development/information sharing (19%). Of those considering themselves successful, 71% (n=15) received LASA grants equal to the funding amount they had requested, while 29% (n=6) received less than the amount requested.

Respondents were asked about the non-quantifiable outcomes of their LASA grant project as well, and the responses were abundant and effusive, including the following: increased morale among employees, improved quality of farm products, "acquired more new skills than we had imagined", "it challenged us to work harder in pursuit of something that seemed a little far away", "our farm became an educational space and a resource" to other farmers, "wider networks" including marketing to new demographics, elevated reputation, and strengthened brands. As one farmer put it: "Swagger. We became larger players in the ag scene." Another farmer who grew her business from one to five acres as a result of a funding boost from the program said, "LASA has literally transformed my business, and I am forever grateful for that." Still another grantee, a nonprofit, noted that the grant "allowed us to build the skills, confidence, and reputation to become the fully funded, fully staffed organization we are today."

*A few examples of the production increases LASA has supported:*



**178%** increase in oysters to market  
**750,000** increase of oyster seed  
**10 million** eyed larvae set



**1,000 lbs.** increase in honey production



**Tripled** herd size of pigs



**9,500** broiler chickens  
**40%** labor decrease on laying hens  
**Doubled** flock size of laying hens



**600-900%** increase in aquaponic produce sales  
**2,400** square feet temperature controlled area for vegetable propagation  
**47%** increase of acres in production

## WHAT IMPACT DID THE GRANT FUNDS HAVE ON GRANTEES AND THE FOOD SYSTEM AS A WHOLE? (CONTINUED)

The survey's 27 respondents have secured an aggregate total of **\$2.5 million in additional funding, including \$1.265 million in loans**, since receiving their LASA grants.

**79%** of those respondents say that **the LASA grant helped them secure that funding.**

Interviews with selected grantees rounded out this story. When the **RI Mushroom Company** received a LASA grant in 2014, they were a new business producing approximately 2,500 pounds per week with about three employees and were selling at farmers' markets and to restaurants. They now produce about 40,000 pounds per week and purvey a broad range of mushrooms from partner producers in the northeast, have five trucks on the road daily, added large wholesale and distributor accounts to their customer roster, employ 25 people full time and at the time of the interview were preparing to hire an additional four, and are planning with a number of partners to build an ambitious new food and energy production campus. While the LASA program funds did not, of course, single-handedly grow this business, Michael Hallock, the business's co-founder and CEO, noted that the LASA grant provided critical funding to increase production when there were "no other real options."

When **Seconds First** received a 2016 LASA grant, the social impact business was still in the start-up, "proof of concept phase." The business produces fish cakes made out of underutilized seafood species and locally grown imperfect vegetables, known as seconds, and markets those to institutional food service customers, including those that serve food insecure populations. Back in 2016, Seconds First had a recipe that was still being tested and had some experience purchasing, processing and freezing imperfect vegetables at the Warren-based shared use commercial kitchen and incubator Hope & Main, but the new company was still in the process of ensuring that ingredients could be sourced consistently, that institutional customers could be convinced of the product's worth, and that competitive price points could be hit. The

company's first sales (to an assisted living facility) came in during the grant period, and Erika Lamb, founder, attributes the business's survival to the LASA grant, noting that she knows other business that were at similar stages, did not receive LASA grants, and didn't endure. Seconds First is now selling 2,200 fish cakes per month to institutions, employs 7 to 10 part time staff at any given time, and partners with fishermen who are now able to land species for which there were previously not desirable markets.

With several rounds of LASA support, the **Young Farmer Network** has grown from an informal and unfunded grassroots network that coordinated much beloved farm tours to a critical convener, resource, training provider, and "catalyst for an extraordinary amount of education" and collaboration. The organization has grown to reach and respond directly to the needs of more than 600 aspiring, small and beginning farmers in Rhode Island and southeast Massachusetts. LASA has been the organization's primary source funds that has enabled their increased growth and scope. Sarah Turkus, a farmer and organization's coordinator, noted, "LASA was an amazing opportunity to envision what we could do to build on what we had started. And the second round of funding prompted a second round of dreaming."

In interviews and in surveys, grantees specified that it was not just the infusion of funds, but that the fact that those funds came from the state that was significant, meaningful and valuable. As one grantee noted, "The public private partnership is an attractive part of the story I can take to other investors... It's powerful (for them) to see that that's where the state is putting its money and that philanthropy co-invested—much more powerful than if (the investment was made by) either one alone." Another noted that because of the state's small size the investment feels like "a neighborly vote of liquid confidence... It's (the state saying), 'You have a good idea, we believe in you, you should get a leg up on that... and we know that FSA (Farm Service Agency) will turn you down (if you ask for a loan).'"

In addition to gathering information about grantees' impacts and successes, the evaluation explored opportunities to increase the program's efficacy in its next years. Those survey respondents who reported they were somewhat successful or not successful in their LASA projects were asked about the most significant barriers they

## WHAT IMPACT DID THE GRANT FUNDS HAVE ON GRANTEES AND THE FOOD SYSTEM AS A WHOLE? (CONTINUED)



encountered that limited success. Of those who responded to this question, 30% (n=3) identified “incorrect assumptions made in defining the project.” Other themes that emerged were unforeseen personal challenges, slower momentum or uptick of interest in the product or program than anticipated, and the slow pace of change in altering people’s shopping and eating habits.

It is worth noting that in the process of reaching out to the 44 unique grantees invited to respond to the survey, just three organizations were no longer operating. Because the grant program prioritizes investment in relatively high risk, new and small operations, this number is notably small. While this evaluation was underway, the USDA released an evaluation of their Value Added Producer Grant (VAPG) program, which is one of the LASA program’s closest federal counterparts (though the grants it provides are significantly larger, as is its average recipient business). The VAPG evaluation found that receipt of grants and size of grant impacted business survival—

“risk of failing decreased significantly with increasing grant size.”

When asked what would have improved their grant project outcomes, key themes mentioned were networking events with potential buyers, having a mentor, structured opportunities to learn from other grantees or other people in the state, and increased funding from LASA.

Grantees were asked an open-ended question about the key challenges they faced in implementing their LASA-funded projects. With 96% (n=26) grantees reporting, most grantees reported that key challenges related to the learning curve associated with starting or using something new (new machinery, production systems, products, programs). A number of grantees noted that receiving LASA funding in advance of the growing season (e.g. in late winter) would magnify the efficacy of the grant.

Through the survey, as an answer to a broad range of questions, a theme that emerged repeatedly was grantee interest in learning from other grantees, farmers, and practitioners. Thirty percent of respondents (n=8) revealed that they accessed technical assistance of some kind during the grant period, and 100% of those found that assistance “helpful” or “very helpful.” They sought help from diverse sources: project collaborators, fellow farmers, the Conservation Law Foundation, Land for Good, Conservation Districts, Cooperative Extension (of RI and other New England states).

Respondents were also asked what kind of technical assistance or supports they wished they had had access to, and 44% of respondents answered this write-in question. Five noted a need for financial management supports (including tax advice). Three wished they had had business planning support. Other kinds of supports mentioned included better understanding of how to navigate the state’s regulatory environment and the real estate market.

Four respondents noted they would have benefited from more structured opportunities for peer to peer support. As one respondent noted, “This is the way (technical assistance in) farming works: You find people, including fellow farmers, who have done what you’re trying to do... They are more apt not to talk down to you.” This theme was reinforced in interviews as well.

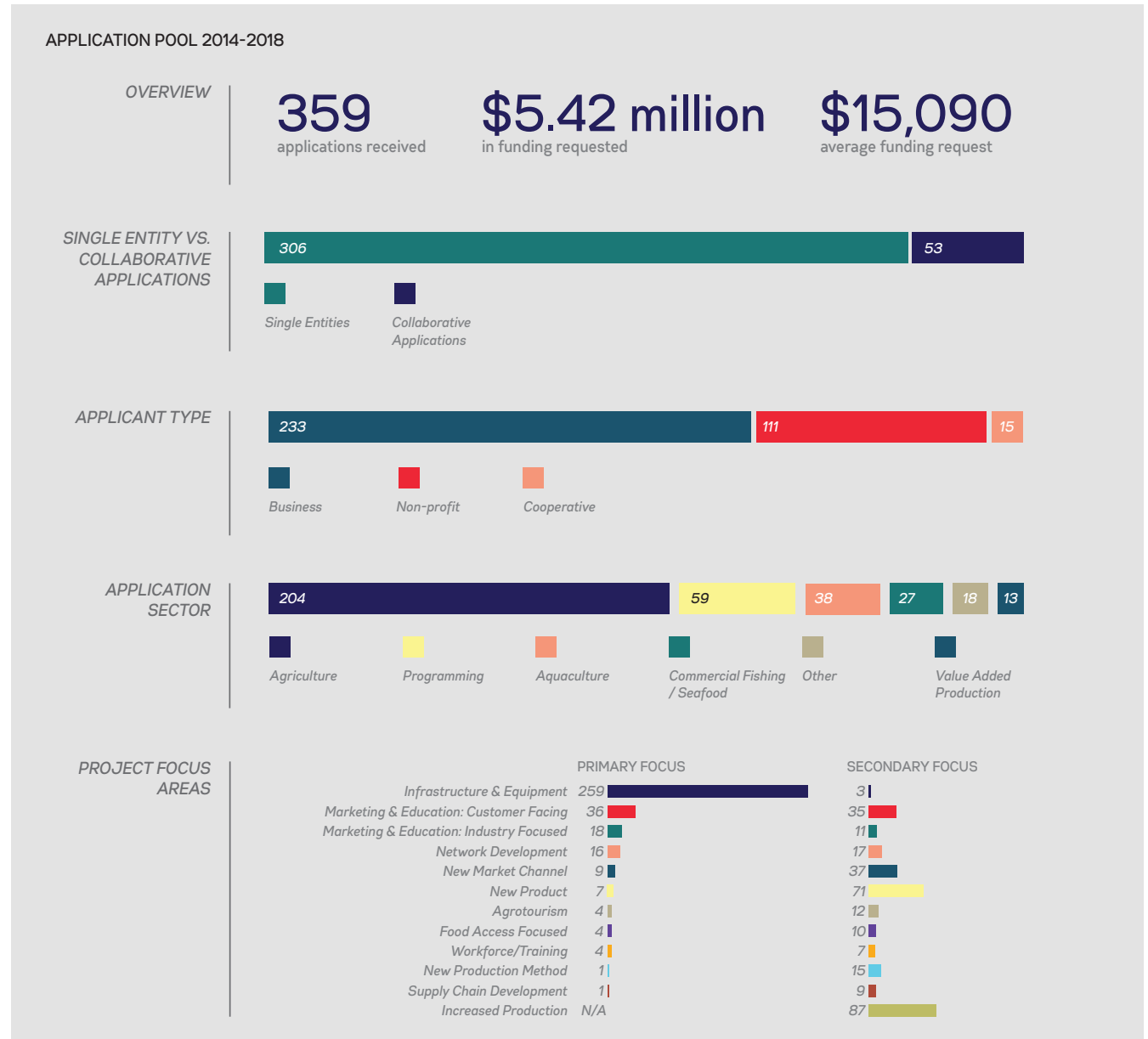


# WHAT TRENDS CAN BE OBSERVED FROM YEAR TO YEAR IN THE APPLICATION POOL AND IN THE GRANTEE POOL ITSELF?

The applicant pool experienced some shifts over the course of the grant program's first five years. The largest number of applications was received in the first year (90), with applications in all other years hovering between 60 and 75. Members of the Advisory Committee recalled that in 2014, likely because the program was new and unknown, a large number of applications were received from ineligible entities or for projects that were not a great fit with LASA's priorities, accounting for the higher than average response rate in year 1.

Interestingly, over time, the number of applications received by collaborative groups (rather than by a single entity) decreased as a share of the applicant pool, while the number of collaborative groups receiving grants remained stable. Similarly, over time the number of nonprofit organizations applying for LASA grants decreased each year, with 33 applying in the first year and just 14 applying in 2018, while the number of nonprofit sector grants awarded remained somewhat stable (between 4 and 6 awardees in this sector each year).

In every year of the program, grants from the agriculture sector dominated both the applicant pool and the grantee pool. Between five and ten applications for aquaculture projects were received in each year of the grant program, and additional four to seven were received from the commercial fishing sector. Applications from value added processors using locally grown ingredients increased over time, from just one in 2014 to





four in 2018. Over the years of the program, applications with a primary focus on customer facing marketing and education decreased notably from 13% to just 3%. “Infrastructure and equipment” and “increased production” remained stable as the leading primary and secondary areas of project focus in both the applicant pool and the grantee pool over the LASA program’s first five years.

To enrich the data, the members of the LASA Advisory Committee were asked to report, anecdotally, on how they saw the pool of applications evolve over time. One member remembered that in 2015 and 2016, requests for infrastructure supporting agricultural season extension were high, and that the following year saw a trend in requests for cold storage infrastructure (once farms were able to produce more and year-round, they needed support for handling and storing those added crops).

Another member noted that in the early years of the grant program, aquaculture was a relatively new industry in the state. From 2014 to 2017, according to the Coastal Resources Management Center, the state’s aquaculture industry grew from 52 to 73 farms. And over the five years of the LASA program, applications and grants awarded tell a story of a growing and maturing industry. Whereas the LASA program was

funding startup materials (such as oyster seed and cages) for shellfish farms in early years, later years saw support for marketing cooperatives, ice machines to support product quality and food safety, and a RI-based oyster seed company.

The Advisory Committee also observed an increase in sophistication and professionalism among applications in the program’s later years: an increased emphasis on and specificity about target markets, more technical information cited from credible sources in applications as a basis for trialing something new, more emphasis on food safety and shifting regulatory requirements in wholesale markets.

The Advisory Committee observed that farmers’ approach to investment and growth—and thus their LASA projects— is shaped by the prevalence of agricultural businesses operating on leased land in Rhode Island. For example, farmers frequently applied for funds to build movable infrastructure, and in a few cases, landowners/ landlords applied for LASA funding for infrastructure to support the multiple tenant farmers leasing adjacent parcels. As one committee member noted, “That’s the sector responding to limited access to farmland” in a state with the nation’s highest per acre farmland prices.

## THE FUTURE OF LASA

Over the course of the first five years of the grant program, much has changed in the RI food system. In some ways, the context in which the program operates has shifted. CommerceRI (the state's economic development agency) has taken a more vigorous interest in food and has created loan programs at a variety of scales. Multiple economic development reports have identified food industries as a lever for economic growth here, reaching into production, processing, distribution, culinary/food service, and tourism. Governor Gina Raimondo has focused on food industry and food security since her election in 2014. She hired the state's first Director of Food Strategy, the first comprehensive state Food Strategy was released, and implementation is underway. Notably, the RI Food Strategy identifies increased capital access for food systems enterprises as a central objective, and the Rhode Island Food Policy Council has established a Capital Access Project to address that objective. The state Department of Health invested in municipal Health Equity Zones with improving food access as one key area of focus. The RI Foundation created an impact investment fund, and in addition has awarded innovation grants to several food-focused enterprises. Social Enterprise Greenhouse (SEG), a business accelerator based in Providence, hosts an annual cohort of food-focused entrepreneurs. Both SEG and the Fair Food Fund (originated in Michigan, operating out of Boston, and serving all of New England) have created funds for small/scale appropriate loans for food and agriculture industries.

Members of the Advisory Committee noted that "micro adjustments" have been made each year since the program's founding to increase its efficacy and to respond to these changes in context: tweaks to the application to ensure that the committee receives the information it needs while the application process remains accessible to all applicants, additions to the grant program priorities to reflect activity and need around the state, shifts in the composition of the Advisory Committee. The program was structured to be nimble and responsive, it has been, and many see that that has been critical to its success.

While the number of players, the volume of food dialogue, and general awareness of local food (what it is, where to find it, and what it can mean to a place) have increased, for many small farm and food businesses, not much has changed. LASA remains as

critical and as incomparable to them now as it was when it was created. "The LASA program was created for people who are not bankable," one Advisory Committee member noted. Grantees are often beginning entities with limited operating experience and limited records. They lack assets and collateral and are likely to farm on leased land. They grow crops that are not typically insured by federal programs. They are high risk. But the LASA program can take those risks, by design.

*"LASA was an amazing opportunity to envision what we could do to build on what we had started. And the second round of funding prompted a second round of dreaming."*

When the LASA grant program was founded, the state partnered with private philanthropies who agreed to co-fund the program for the first five years in order to build the foundations, establish administration processes, and, essentially, prove the concept that a small grants program could meaningfully contribute to addressing the issues that LASA sought to address. The findings of this evaluation bear that out: the concept has been proven. The LASA program was founded to address a particular kind of capital need, it has done so successfully, and yet that need still exists. "LASA should fund as many things that are un-fundable by others as possible," one grantee noted, adding that the LASA program could be complemented by other sources of "patient capital."

The 27 grantees who completed the evaluation survey were asked to what extent they see the LASA program as important and relevant in 2018 as it was in 2014. Their response was resounding. They said, "(LASA) lowers the risk for farmers to innovate... and this increases the diversity and quality of agricultural products in RI." They observed that LASA gives them the opportunity to take risks that "could potentially increase profitability and sustainability", and that "as the market for (local food) becomes tighter, innovation and creative differentiation are important to success." "It's a wonderful opportunity for farmers and really one of the only



## THE FUTURE OF LASA (CONTINUED)

ones out there.” “We would not have been able to make these great improvements to our business in the timeframe that we did without LASA support. The same (improvements) would have taken five or six years at least.” “We received the grant when no bank would even consider us for a loan. It was a vital part of our company’s growth and essential for anyone trying to start a farm in RI.” “We were able to take the small amount we received and use it earn 5 times that amount in increased sales.”

LASA program stakeholders agree that the program is invaluable, and they also agree that it can grow and improve. Grantees were asked what changes should be made to the program in future years to keep it effective. Answers ranged from increased follow up with grantees during the grant years, altering the grant cycle to provide funding in advance of the growing season, and cultivating more of a cohort among current and alumni grantees. Members of the Advisory Committee echoed this interest in creating more opportunities for grantees’ aggregate knowledge to be shared and noted that a foundation for this effort has been a natural outgrowth of the LASA program, that “the lines of communication are open.”

In addition, the following key findings from this evaluation that should inform the LASA grant program’s next steps:

- **Small investments can have big returns** – Small grants and a small total investment have resulted in notable growth of funded businesses and organizations, in ways that are both quantifiable and more elusive. A strong foundational structure and an innovative successful program have been built that have addressed a critical gap in access to capital in the food and agriculture sectors. That foundation should be built upon.
- **Grantees want to learn from each other** – While few grantees reported that they wanted “technical assistance” during the grant period, when it was framed as such, the desire for structured opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and mentorship opportunities was expressed repeatedly and exuberantly. The state’s small size and existing close relationships across the sectors funded (farming, aquaculture, nonprofit, marketing, processing) can be leveraged to facilitate knowledge sharing, cohort strength, and relationships among grantees.

- **Cross-sector partnership has enhanced the program’s success and impacts** – Public private-partnership structure—in program funding, administration, awards decisions by the Advisory Committee, and outreach—has been critical to the program’s success and has resulted in a program and in individual investments that are seen by many stakeholders as a whole greater than the sum of its parts.
- **LASA exists within a broader capital landscape that is fragmented and incomplete** – While new sources of capital have emerged in the state and the region, they are not all accessible to LASA’s target grantee. Further there are entities within the field of agriculture and fisheries that are not eligible for LASA funding (e.g. capital investments in commercial fisheries) or are outside of program priorities (e.g. larger or more established farms), but which experience significant challenges competing within complex global market conditions and which would benefit immeasurably from access to new forms of capital. As a small fund, it’s critical that the LASA grant program maintain limited funding parameters in order to achieve more concentrated impacts and to fund otherwise un-fundable ventures. But significant need exists beyond LASA’s target audience. A more integrated, well-mapped and accessible ecosystem of sources of capital is greatly needed in RI.

Grantees see the LASA grant program as vital, and the program’s impacts have been notable. A number of grant and investment models can inspire LASA’s continued impact and evolution toward being one vital player in a more integrated and supportive capital access landscape for food businesses. For example, the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Initiative partners with public and private sector players to offer grants and loans (sometimes bundled together) to both working lands businesses and to service providers (marketing, training, succession planning, etc.) serving those industries. New York State offers a Consolidated Funding Application that serves as a gateway to diverse funding sources within the state—with one application, applicants can access a broad range of state-offered funding, easing the burden of navigating the timing, eligibility and application requirements of multiple complex programs. RSF Social Finance has experimented with and pioneered the Shared Gifting model, within which funding applicants gather together, share

## THE FUTURE OF LASA (CONTINUED)

experiences, discuss potential projects, and ultimately allocate funds amongst themselves: a collaborative process that incentivizes ongoing collaboration.

Taken together, these very different approaches can inspire DEM, LASA and the RI Food Policy Council—along with essential new partners like CommerceRI, SEG, Farm Credit East, and others— to improve farm, fisheries, and food business access to diverse sources of capital as they grow and scale by: 1) serving as a gateway and navigational tool to diverse sources of funding, 2) streamlining and simplifying application processes for multiple diverse funding sources, 3) incentivizing collaboration and network building, 4) integrating and bundling resources, such as grants, loans, buyer meetings, investor pitch opportunities, technical assistance, or mentoring.

The story of LASA is the story of a program that has made significant incremental impact with small individual investments and a small aggregate investment. As one Advisory Committee member noted, “The LASA program shows the value of lots of little bets.”

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*Photos are sourced from the annual LASA Showcase Booklets, available at: [rifoodcouncil.org/lasa-grants-program/](http://rifoodcouncil.org/lasa-grants-program/)*

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